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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000331

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: AUTHORITIES REDIRECT THE CHERNOBYL PATH

REF: MINSK 310

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

#### Summary

1. (SBU) Minsk authorities denied permission to Chernobyl Path organizers to hold their April 26 demonstration at Yakub Kolas Square in downtown Minsk and march to the new national library, but "suggested" that demonstrators gather at the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (BNAS) and march to Bangalore Square. Although disappointed, organizers accepted the authorities' route, asking police forces to allow demonstrators who gather at Yakub Kolas to freely move to the BNAS. However, the authorities' statements indicate that they will maintain tight security and punish organizers should they disregard instructions. Authorities refused to sanction similar events planned in oblast capital cities. End summary.

#### Authorities Alter Chernobyl Path, Opposition Agrees

2. (C) On April 19, Minsk authorities denied members of the opposition coalition's April 26 Chernobyl Path organizing committee (orgcommittee) permission to hold their demonstration at Yakub Kolas Square and march to the new national library (reftel). Instead, authorities "suggested" the demonstrators gather at the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (BNAS) and march to Bangalore Square away from Minsk's main avenues. Deputy head of the Belarusian National Front (BNF) and orgcommittee member Ales Yanukevich in an April 20 meeting with Poloff called the authorities' suggestion a violation of Belarusian law, noting that officials legally could not alter demonstration or mass rally details without the applicant's express permission.

3. (C) Despite the orgcommittee's discontent with the authorities' decision, Yanukevich confirmed to Poloff that the orgcommittee agreed to hold the Chernobyl Path at the BNAS at 18:00 on April 26 and march to Bangalore Square. At BNAS, the orgcommittee chair and BNAS member Ivan Nikitchenko will read the coalition's Chernobyl resolution to the crowd and hold a vote of those in favor and those against. Other opposition political leaders are not scheduled to speak. Demonstrators will then march to the church at Bangalore Square and at 20:00 will stand in silence for 21 minutes in commemoration of Chernobyl victims 21 years after the disaster. The crowd will then disperse.

#### Free Passage to BNAS? Organizers Officially Warned

4. (C) The orgcommittee on April 20 asked senior Minsk city

police officials to not use force against demonstrators and allow those who arrive at Yakub Kolas Square to freely move to the BNAS. The police stated that Yakub Kolas Square would be quite "inaccessible," but agreed to the orgcommittee's request. Yanukevich on April 23 told Poloff that the meeting with police was positive, although they warned him and other orgcommittee members to "try their best" not to be indicted on criminal charges.

15. (C) This is not the first time orgcommittee members have been warned by the authorities. On April 18, the Minsk Executive Committee in their first meeting with the orgcommittee allowed two state media cameramen and one plainclothes security officer to film the discussion, claiming the footage would be "used in court as evidence" that Chernobyl Path organizers were officially warned about their responsibilities during the demonstration. The orgcommittee walked out of the meeting before it even started, telling reporters that they were ready to hold talks with the authorities in a "normal atmosphere" and not one of ultimatums and intimidation.

#### Regional Events Planned

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16. (C) Regional activists in the oblast capitals plan to hold their own Chernobyl Path demonstrations; the largest in the Chernobyl affected cities of Mogilyov and Gomel. In an April 23 phone conversation, Mogilyov BNF leader Dmitry Solovyov told Poloff that authorities denied the Mogilyov democratic forces permission to hold the rally, claiming that permission had already been granted to the state-funded police organization "Shchiet Chernobylya" (the Shield of Chernobyl) to hold a rally at 11:00 at the Lyubush monument dedicated to

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Chernobyl victims. Authorities suggested the local opposition collaborate with "Shchiet Chernobylya." Solovyov doubted opposition members would be allowed to speak at the event, but they were eager to participate. At 15:30, approximately 50-70 activists of the Mogilyov opposition will then march to a memorial cross outside the city limits for a commemorative meeting at 16:00.

17. (U) Planned demonstrations in other oblast capitals are not sanctioned. Activists in Grodno and Vitebsk did not apply for permission with authorities to lay flowers at Chernobyl memorials and hold candlelight vigils downtown. In Gomel, authorities denied permission on the often-used pretext that demonstration organizers were not capable of ensuring proper order and sanitary conditions.

#### Comment

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18. (C) Although the orgcommittee altered the Chernobyl Path route to please the authorities, we expect the usual heavy security service presence and preemptive detentions of political and youth leaders and event organizers. Organizers have distributed thousands of leaflets and stickers promoting the event -- calling for people to meet on Yakub Kolas Square and not the BNAS -- and hope for a 7,000-10,000 people turnout. We see no reason to expect the demonstration to exceed last year's size (approximately 3,000-4,000). Emboffs will observe the Minsk and Mogilyov rallies and report appropriately.  
Stewart